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ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
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FM AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8017  
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SAN SALVADOR 001959

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E.O. 12958: N/A  
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SUBJECT: SALVADORAN VP ANNOUNCES RUN FOR THE PRESIDENCY  
REF: SAN SALVADOR 1947

11. (U) Ana Vilma de Escobar, El Salvador's Vice-President, has announced her possible candidacy for the ARENA party's nomination for President in the 2009 election. Escobar made her announcement in a hastily organized press conference on September 27. In her statement, she said only the she "wanted to show (her) interest in participating as a 'precandidate,'" and was careful not to expressly declare her candidacy. (Note: As per our read of the Salvadoran Constitution, an official candidacy would probably require her to relinquish her post as Vice-President by May 2008. End note.) The announcement seems to have caught ARENA party leaders somewhat by surprise, but none have thus far publicly come out in opposition to her candidacy. Salvadoran President Antonio "Tony" Saca was out of the country when Escobar held her press conference. Upon his return a few hours later, he described the announcement as "an example of the freedom and democracy within the ARENA party," and told the press that Escobar had informed him of her plans prior to her announcement.

12. (U) The timing of Escobar's announcement is not accidental, coming mere hours after the FMLN announcement that Mauricio Funes will be its candidate for the presidency (reftel). The announcement may also have been timed to help frame the agenda of ARENA's general convention which is being held on September 28. Escobar no doubt hopes that her 'precandidacy' will steal some momentum from a possible run by Rene Figueroa, the Minister of Public Security, who is often mentioned as a leading candidate for the top spot on the ARENA ticket. (Note: Initial polls allegedly show Escobar well ahead of Figueroa. End Note.) She may also hope reaction to her announcement will blunt recent discussions in the press regarding a poll released earlier this month that suggests a large portion of the electorate feels a man is more capable of serving as President than a woman. (Note: The poll results do not indicate the strength of the gender issue in the overall voting decision. End Note.)

13. (U) Biographical Note: Ana Vilma Albanes de Escobar was born on March 2, 1954. She has served as El Salvador's Vice-President since 2004. Escobar has been an active member of the ARENA party and currently serves as its executive director. For several years she was Director of the Salvadoran Social Security Institute under ARENA President Francisco Flores. She also worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development mission in El Salvador for nine years. Escobar holds a degree in Economics from the Jesuit University of Central America (the "UCA") in San Salvador. Escobar is married to prominent businessman Carlos Patricio Escobar, and they have one daughter.  
Glazer